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Archival Literacy and Primary Source Literacy

A Collaborative Instructional Toolkit for Introductory Composition and Beyond¹

KRISTIN LEAMAN AND
ADRIANA HARMEYER

ABSTRACT This article is a case study that addresses challenges archivists and introductory composition instructors can experience when working to embed archival and primary source literacy into a course and models how to successfully overcome related obstacles. Building on the excellent work of James Roussain, it employs the *archivist-as-educator* model not only to teach the students but also to train the disciplinary instructor. Teaching instructors archival and primary source literacy and training them how to teach these types of literacy enhances student success. Acknowledging the literature that discusses the ineffectiveness of one-shot guest lectures, the authors have designed and piloted an archival and primary source literacy toolkit that provides a scalable and effective model for embedding a module and assignment into an introductory composition course at a large research university. The inquiry-based active-learning activities in the toolkit are scaffolded to prepare students for the assignment. Furthermore, the toolkit provides guidance on how instructors and archivists can collaboratively develop the skills they need to successfully embed the module into introductory composition courses.

¹ The authors would like to thank Professor Sammie Morris, the Purdue Libraries Writing Group, Heather Home, and the *Archivaria* reviewers for their time and helpful feedback on this article.

RÉSUMÉ Cet article est une étude de cas qui répond aux défis que les archivistes et le personnel enseignant en introduction à la composition littéraire peuvent expérimenter dans leur travail d'intégration de la littératie relative aux archives et aux sources primaires dans un cours. Il montre comment surmonter avec succès les obstacles associés. S'appuyant sur l'excellent travail de James Roussain, l'article emploie le modèle de l'*archiviste-pédagogue* non seulement pour enseigner aux étudiant.e.s, mais également pour former le personnel enseignant de la discipline. Enseigner au personnel enseignant la littératie relative aux archives et aux sources primaires, en offrant des formations sur comment enseigner ces types de littératie, améliore le succès des étudiant.e.s. En considérant la littérature qui traite de l'inefficacité des conférences d'invité.e.s ponctuelles, les autrices ont conçu et développé une boîte à outils sur la littératie relatives aux archives et aux sources primaires qui offre un modèle flexible et efficace pour intégrer un module et des exercices dans un cours d'introduction à la composition littéraire dans une grande université de recherche. Les activités d'apprentissage actif basées sur l'enquête contenues dans la boîte à outils sont conçues pour préparer les étudiant.e.s à la tâche. De plus, la boîte à outils fournit des conseils sur la manière dont le personnel enseignant et les archivistes peuvent développer en collaboration les compétences dont elles et ils ont besoin pour intégrer avec succès le module dans les cours d'introduction à la composition littéraire.

Introduction

Primary sources, often housed in archival institutions, are rich sources for research across a variety of disciplines and provide opportunities to further develop critical thinking skills. Primary source research differs from other research methods and requires specialized training that focuses on archival literacy and primary source literacy. However, many instructors, despite conducting primary source research as part of their own work, do not have training in teaching these research skills to their students. As they consider how to implement archival research into their curriculum, instructors must grapple with several theoretical and practical questions: What are their intended learning outcomes? What kind of assignment will best develop these skills? How much time should be spent developing these skills? Do they have enough experience to successfully teach their students these literacies, or should they bring in an outside partner? Sammie L. Morris, Tamar Chute, and Ellen D. Swain address some of these questions in “Teaching with Archives: A Guide for Archivists, Librarians, and Educators,” providing guidance on planning, consultations, format of instruction sessions, partnership, communication, and instructional design.² We build upon that guidance and go one step further by presenting a collaborative model that will facilitate the successful inclusion of archival and primary source literacy in introductory composition courses, the Archival and Primary Source Literacy Toolkit. We also build upon James Roussain’s “Pedagogue in the Archive: Reorienting the Archivist as Educator,”³ which recognizes the archivist as an educator who takes an active role in designing activities and assignments, planning class sessions, and teaching class sessions. However, the archivist cannot work alone to educate students when the course instructor will be responsible for answering student inquiries and grading archives-based assignments. To address these concerns, we also employ a *teaching-the-teacher* approach, where the archivist trains the instructor on how to incorporate archival and primary source literacy into their courses.

2 Sammie L. Morris, Tamar Chute, and Ellen Swain, “Teaching with Archives: A Guide for Archivists, Librarians, and Educators,” in *Teaching with Primary Sources*, ed. Christopher J. Prom and Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2016).

3 James Roussain, “Pedagogue in the Archive: Reorienting the Archivist as Educator,” *Archivaria* 90 (Fall 2020): 70–111.

The Archival and Primary Source Literacy Toolkit⁴ was developed and tested during a Fall 2022 introductory composition course at Purdue University, and results from this case study will be discussed in this article. We further refined the toolkit in the Fall 2023 iteration of this course before publishing it in Purdue e-Pubs repository. Kristin Leaman, assistant professor, was the instructor of record for this semester-long, three-credit course and refined the course's structure with a focus on information literacy. Leaman and Adriana Harmeyer, clinical assistant professor and archivist, designed the assignment- and inquiry-based, active-learning, scaffolded activities, and lesson plans in the Archival and Primary Source Literacy Toolkit. We found that an instructor – even one well versed in primary source research – benefits from collaboration with and training from an archivist with specialized expertise in this type of research. Together, we developed a toolkit that fully addressed learning outcomes related to both the research process and the written output of the assignment by utilizing the unique expertise of each instructor. For the purpose of clarity, this article will refer to the disciplinary instructor – be they faculty, staff, or graduate assistant – as *the instructor* and the archives-based instructor as *the archivist*, while acknowledging that this latter role may also be filled by a librarian or other specialist.

The Society of American Archivists' *Dictionary of Archives Terminology* defines *archival literacy* as “competence in or knowledge of archival terminology, organization, and reference tools,” and *primary source literacy* as “knowledge and competency in finding, interpreting, evaluating, and using primary sources.”⁵ In other words, archival literacy instruction develops students' skills in navigating archival institutions and locating sources housed in archives. Primary source literacy focuses on the use of those sources, often housed within archives, by closely considering the evaluation and interpretation of the sources themselves, regardless of their institutional framework. Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah Torres identify the importance of archival intelligence (archival literacy) when teaching students primary source literacy.⁶ Roussain states that a lack of

4 Kristin Leaman and Adriana Harmeyer, “Archival and Primary Source Literacy Toolkit,” Purdue e-Pubs, 2023, <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/alt/>.

5 Society of American Archivists, *Dictionary of Archives Terminology* (2005–2025), s.v. “archival literacy,” <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/archival-literacy.html>; Society of American Archivists, *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*, s.v. “primary source literacy,” <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/primary-source-literacy.html>.

6 Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah Torres, “AI: Archival Intelligence and User Expertise,” *American Archivist* 66, no. 1 (2003): 51–78.

formal pedagogical training for archivists (in graduate programs or professional settings) creates challenges for archivists both in defining outcomes and in seeing themselves as educators. Proposing the use of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL)'s *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, Roussain states that an archivist should "focus on teaching primary source and archival literacy by engaging students in critical thinking through an active learning or inquiry-based approach."⁷ Using Roussain's approach, our toolkit engages the students while also providing guidance on how to engage and train the instructor on archival and primary source literacy.

Literature Review

Literature that focuses on embedding archival and primary source literacy in introductory composition is limited, as history courses are understandably seen as the more natural fit for archival collections, which are perceived as historical in nature. When examining the broader literature, it is clear that a variety of sometimes-contradictory approaches have been implemented, with varied success. There is no consensus regarding the amount of time to devote to archival and primary source literacy training, the role of the instructor, the role of the archivist, or the means of assessing learning outcomes. While the literature explores these many approaches, it has lacked a model with tangible documentation for both archivists and instructors that encourages learning and instruction from both parties.

Teaching Information Literacy and Writing Studies: Volume 1, First-Year Composition Courses, a collection of essays edited by Grace Veach, addresses many challenges and offers several solutions to the difficulties of embedding information literacy into introductory composition courses. In chapter 11, Crystal Goldman and Tamara Rhodes acknowledge the importance of an archivist's involvement in embedding primary source literacy into introductory composition.⁸ Stating that "the emphasis on the need for teaching critical thinking skills

⁷ Roussain, "Pedagogue in the Archive," 88–89.

⁸ Crystal Goldman and Tamara Rhodes, "Using Object-Based Learning to Analyze Primary Sources: New Directions for Information Literacy Instruction in a First-Year Writing Course," in *Teaching Information Literacy and Writing Studies: Volume 1, First-Year Composition Courses*, ed. Grace Veach (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2018): 152.

is there, but improving these skills has been a notoriously difficult outcome for instructors to meet. The analysis of primary sources is one way to fulfill that need,”⁹ Goldman and Rhodes posit that primary source literacy has a place in first-year composition classes and that there are significant benefits with this type of instruction. For instance, either the archivist or the instructor trained by the archivist can teach each session. They note that challenges arise due to miscommunication or poor communication between archivist and instructor, emphasizing the importance of instructor buy-in and of agreement between instructor and archivist on clearly defined goals. The workshop model employed by Goldman and Rhodes is a one-shot model, which they acknowledge causes challenges in assessment. Taking this one-shot model a step further, David Mazella and Julie Grob’s “Collaborations between Faculty and Special Collections Librarians in Inquiry-Driven Classes” discusses how information literacy is compartmentalized and how the process of collaboration between teaching faculty and archivist should work. Mazella and Grob embedded the archivist in the course with three guest lectures throughout the semester, which included smaller writing activities based on materials that were curated for the students during their visit to the archives.¹⁰

Elizabeth Chase advocates for teaching primary source literacy in introductory composition courses, arguing that “first-year students comprise a significant potential use group for archival instruction programs; while these students require structured assignments that differ from those presented to advanced undergraduate majors, they stand to gain significant skills that will benefit them as advanced students.”¹¹ Hitting on the importance of scaffolding assignments and multiple visits to the archive, Chase indicates that it takes far more than a one-shot visit to embed primary source literacy into activities and assignments. Chase states that, for a short paper assignment, the students choose a poem and look at pre-selected materials in the archives and special collections, and then, in an instruction session, archives and special collections “staff will discuss what

9 Goldman and Rhodes, 147.

10 David Mazella and Julie Grob, “Collaborations between Faculty and Special Collections Librarians in Inquiry-Driven Classes,” *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 11, no. 1 (2011): 467–87.

11 Elizabeth A. Chase, “Teaching First-Year Writing with ‘All the Detritus, Debris, and Ephemera’ of Literary Manuscripts,” in *Past or Portal? Enhancing Undergraduate Learning through Special Collections and Archives*, ed. Eleanor Mitchell, Peggy Seiden, and Suzy Taraba (Chicago: Association of College & Research Libraries, 2012), 103.

to look for in a draft and how seeing a poem-in-process changes how we view or understand the poet's finished work."¹² Chase does not elaborate further on the role of the archivist or the instruction session itself, so little can be gleaned about those factors or the impact of that session. While Chase outlines some important features of embedding primary source literacy into an introductory writing course, the article provides no assessment of how impactful the approach, activities, and assignments were in teaching students primary source literacy.

Chase identifies the archivist's knowledge of the collections and familiarity with the reading room as the primary factors in collaboration but does not discuss the process of collaborative teaching, the archivist as a co-instructor (who does far more than assist in these instances), or instructors who may need guidance and instruction on archival and primary source literacy. Peter Carini identifies a history of archivists denying their roles as educators, choosing instead to take "a neutral approach that simply introduces students to the rules and tools of research" without taking substantial responsibility for research methods.¹³ Roussain acknowledges this hesitancy among archivists to identify as educators and references Magia G. Krause's 2010 article, stating, "Despite a growing literature supporting and advocating for the archivist's place in the classroom, some archivists remain hesitant to self-identify as teachers."¹⁴ Carini further posits that, as archivists continue to acknowledge the inevitable implicit biases in their work, which make neutrality impossible, they are "uniquely qualified to teach those unfamiliar with primary sources how to use, judge, and evaluate these materials for themselves."¹⁵

At the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Merinda Kaye Hensley, Benjamin P. Murphy, and Ellen D. Swain collaborated to assess the impact of archival instruction in an introductory rhetoric and writing course. The archival instruction was embedded in every section of this course with roughly 220 students.¹⁶ Prior to their archives visit, students were asked to watch a tutorial

¹² Chase, 106.

¹³ Peter Carini, "Archivists as Educators: Integrating Primary Sources into the Curriculum," *Journal of Archival Organization* 7, no. 1–2 (2009): 41–50, 49.

¹⁴ Roussain, "Pedagogue in the Archive," 72.

¹⁵ Carini, "Archivists as Educators," 49.

¹⁶ Merinda Kaye Hensley, Benjamin P. Murphy, and Ellen D. Swain, "Analyzing Archival Intelligence: A Collaboration between Library Instruction and Archives," *Communications in Information Literacy* 8, no. 1 (2014): 96–114, 101.

where they were provided information on archival and primary source literacy. The assessment showed that the impact of this approach is quite low and that it does not meet the goals of either the archivist or the instructor. While the archivist covered all relevant points in this single session, this was too much information without enough practice. “The results of this study indicate that developing an information literacy program around archives will take more than a one-shot visit by undergraduate students.”¹⁷ Furthermore, Hensley et al. state, “As the academy continues to explore and create high-impact learning experiences, undergraduate research opportunities in the social sciences and the humanities may provide the structure for archivists to move beyond primary source orientation to a comprehensive information literacy strategy for archival literacy.”¹⁸

Archival and primary source literacy is, of course, not confined to the use of physical materials in writing courses. The use of digital archives in teaching rhetoric is discussed in Jessica Enoch and Pamela VanHaitmsma’s “Archival Literacy: Reading the Rhetoric of Digital Archives in the Undergraduate Classroom.” Enoch and VanHaitmsma emphasize the importance of collaboration. However, their focus is on collaborations between archival materials and students and not on those between instructor and archivist; they do not address collaboration on preparing assignments and developing lesson plans. These authors also do not discuss or acknowledge the role an archivist could and should play in the creation of assignments, which further demonstrates the need for a clear framework that could aid both archivist and instructor in the collaborative teaching process. The authors have students move from archival analysis to archival production,¹⁹ with one possible outcome being a digital exhibition in Omeka. While this can be a valuable learning experience for students, it would have been enhanced had the authors drawn upon the expertise of an archivist for guidance on metadata and appropriate description, use, and display of archival materials. Further, this article shows a lack of clarity surrounding the terms *archival literacy* and *primary source literacy*, using them interchangeably despite their distinct purposes.

¹⁷ Hensley, Murphy, and Swain, 111.

¹⁸ Hensley, Murphy, and Swain, 112.

¹⁹ Jessica Enoch and Pamela VanHaitmsma, “Archival Literacy: Reading the Rhetoric of Digital Archives in the Undergraduate Classroom,” *College Composition and Communication* 67, no. 2 (2015): 216–42, 234.

While our focus is introductory composition, there is value in examining literature on embedding archival and primary source literacy into undergraduate courses beyond composition, such as in Teresa Gray's "Special Collections in the Classroom: Embedding Special Collections in an Undergraduate History Writing Class."²⁰ Gray discusses an approach to embedding primary sources into a history course and collaborating with the instructor, but it is clear that the bulk of the labour falls on the archivist. In fact, much of the literature reveals that the duty of teaching primary source literacy and archival literacy in these collaborations often falls on the archivist, whether this is intentional or not. This often results in departmental faculty members' belief that the archivist must fill this role and leads them to minimize their own involvement in and understanding of the curriculum. A case study on teaching with primary sources from the Society of American Archivists highlights this challenge, noting that the faculty member provided feedback to the archivist that indicated their students' greatest obstacle was learning that archival research was an iterative process. The archivist and the history subject librarian each conducted one instruction session during the semester. The faculty member suggested that, for future collaborations, all students should have one-on-one research consultations with both the archivist and the subject librarian to "force students to think more intentionally about these issues early on in their career as historians."²¹ Unfortunately, this model is not scalable or sustainable for archivists, especially those at large research institutions. Cinda Nofziger and Emily Swenson both recognize the unscalable nature of these types of collaborations in their case study *Success in the Long Term: Learning Objectives in a Semester-Long Research Course*. Nofziger and Swenson worked with an upper-level history course, where students would create a website to share what they learned in the course. A significant amount of work was required from the archivists, and while they found the work gratifying, they also state, "We also recognize that the archival staff time and effort put into this class cannot be reproduced in every class."²² Mazella and Grob

20 Teresa Gray, "Special Collections in the Classroom: Embedding Special Collections in an Undergraduate History Writing Class," *Public Services Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (2020): 139–45.

21 Samantha Crisp, *Collaborating for Impact in Teaching with Primary Sources*, Case Studies on Teaching with Primary Sources (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2017), 7.

22 Cinda Nofziger and Emily Swenson, *Success in the Long Term: Learning Objectives in a Semester-Long Research Course*, Case Studies on Teaching with Primary Sources (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2019), 7.

also touch on the compartmentalization that can take place in collaborations between faculty and librarians, causing different expectations regarding instruction. “Such compartmentalization allowed faculty instruction to remain largely unaffected by librarians’ delivery of IL instruction and effectively fenced off disciplinary knowledge and curricula from the goals of IL and general education.”²³ Krause states that few of the archivists interviewed discussed the need to train the instructor on archival and primary source literacy. One of Krause’s respondents wrote, “Professors/teachers need to be taught as well, so that they are not sending their students over blindly unaware of our unique setup.”²⁴ Moreover, instructors need training in archival and primary source literacy at their university repositories before creating, teaching, and grading assignments.

In “Bridging the Gap: Competencies for Teaching with Primary Sources,” Gordon Daines, Maggie Kopp, and Dainan Skeem identified this problem and suggested ways in which faculty can gain these literacies. Their survey of 17 faculty members at Brigham Young University found that “all the faculty members, regardless of their discipline, had little formal training on how to teach with primary sources.”²⁵ The authors describe collaboration between archivists and faculty members as paramount and discuss how scaffolding assignments can be particularly helpful when teaching students primary source literacy. The core competencies outlined in their article are critical for both faculty and archivists to keep in mind, but faculty are also in need of tangible teaching materials and instruction on how to embed primary source literacy modules into their curricula. Tamar Chute, Ellen Swain, and Sammie Morris explore examples of the teach-the-teacher approach in their “Connecting Students and Primary Sources: Cases and Examples,” where they state that this can be “accomplished in a number of ways and can have a widespread and lasting effect on student learning.”²⁶ Among the examples they provide is the Brooklyn Historical Society’s TeachArchives.org, a three-year grant project with 18 faculty

23 Mazella and Grob, “Collaborations between Faculty and Special Collections Librarians in Inquiry-Driven Classes,” 468.

24 Magia G. Krause, “Learning in the Archives: A Report on Instructional Practices,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 6, no. 4 (2008): 233–68, 254.

25 J. Gordon Daines III, Maggie Gallup Kopp, and Dainan M. Skeem, “Bridging the Gap: Competencies for Teaching with Primary Sources,” *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 22, no. 4 (2022): 855–78, 856.

26 Tamar Chute, Ellen Swain, and Sammie L. Morris, “Connecting Students and Primary Sources: Cases and Examples,” in Prom and Hinchliffe, *Teaching with Primary Sources*, 155.

members at three colleges that saw more than 1,100 students receive primary source literacy instruction and provided robust teaching materials for anyone who teaches or would like to teach with primary sources.²⁷ In this case the teach-the-teacher approach was key for scalability and impact, ensuring that opportunities for integrating archival and primary source literacy into the curriculum are not limited by archivists' availability or by instructors' preconceived assumptions that it is not their responsibility to teach these types of literacy.

Kathryn G. Matheny discusses the importance of the instruction consultation and collaboration between instructors and archivists when planning an archives and special collections visit for a class. Like Goldman and Rhodes, Matheny posits that potential problems can arise because "faculty may be unaware of the archives' educational role and services, they may not understand what their students need in the way of support, and they may not present their requests clearly."²⁸ In the same vein, archivists may have difficulty initiating and articulating conversations about the visits that could result in correcting misconceptions, clarifying goals, or creating activities.²⁹ Matheny states that awareness of these challenges is integral to overcoming them and that collaboration should take place at the syllabus-planning stage and not at the last minute. Without structured, ongoing collaboration and clear communication between archivists and instructors about embedding primary source literacy into a course, the students are often left confused about assignment goals and how to achieve them. Krause also highlights the importance of archivists meeting with professors ahead of time to familiarize themselves with the assignments and syllabuses in order to pull relevant collections and discuss outcomes. In Krause's interviews with archivists, many stated that having the professor participate in the instruction was effective, but it was difficult to determine the level at which archivists expected professors to participate in the archival and primary source literacy instruction.³⁰ Krause's article also notes that archivists mentioned navigation skills as an area of expertise that exceeds faculty members' archival research

27 Chute, Swain, and Morris, 155–56.

28 Kathryn G. Matheny, "Instruction Consultation for Archives Visits: Why No One Talks About It, and Why They Should," *American Archivist* 82, no. 2 (2019): 484–507, 488.

29 Matheny, 484–507.

30 Magia G. Krause, "It Makes History Alive for Them: The Role of Archivists and Special Collections Librarians in Instructing Undergraduates," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 36, no. 5 (2010): 401–11, 407.

skills. One interviewee went as far as to say that navigation skills are the best thing archivists can offer.³¹ These are skills that can and should be taught to instructors so that they will be better equipped to create and grade assignments, teach and support their students, and effectively communicate with archivists.

In their “Archive as Laboratory: Engaging STEM Students and STEM Collections,” Tracy Grimm and Sharra Vostral discuss the importance of collaboration between archivist and teaching faculty by stating that they “began by determining the learning outcomes for each archive module. The outcomes needed to meet Grimm’s archival literacy instruction goals as well as Vostral’s coverage of subject matter for her courses.”³² While their article focuses on STEM students, this collaboration used the same approach Matheny advocates for in her article. Creating a lab space for the students with curated collections, Grimm and Vostral provided activities that were scalable for archivist, instructor, and students, as some of the class sizes were quite large. Due to the limitations of class size, students did not have the liberty of freely exploring the collections in the archives; however, Grimm and Vostral acknowledge the drawbacks and benefits of this approach: “It streamlines the experience while still offering an encounter with the material culture of primary documents. However, circumscribing the students’ choices meant they did not get to experience a cold search, with its inherent dead ends and also unexpected finds.”³³ In an ideal setting, students would have the opportunity to conduct “cold searches,” or searches undertaken on their own, without the use of predetermined search terms or collections chosen by the instructor, and to experience the investigation process of “dead ends and unexpected finds.” As Grimm and Vostral state about archival and primary source literacy across all undergraduate fields, “Developing skills to analyze documents and their origins, including their context, challenges the habit to accept the validity of a Google result.”³⁴ The often-limited class sizes of introductory composition courses can facilitate some of the free archival exploration and inquiry-based active learning that is impractical for courses with higher enrolment numbers.

31 Krause, 404.

32 Tracy B. Grimm and Sharra Vostral, “Archive as Laboratory: Engaging STEM Students and STEM Collections,” *Engineering Studies* 11, no. 2 (2019): 135–52, 142.

33 Grimm and Vostral, 148.

34 Grimm and Vostral, 136.

Intervention

1. Instructor Training

The first and arguably most important step to embedding archival and primary source literacy into an introductory composition course is for the course instructor to have a foundational understanding of both types of literacy so that they can adequately work with their students and grade their assignments. In order to successfully guide their students through the assignment, the instructor must also have a solid understanding of their own institution's archives and special collections.³⁵ They must understand procedures for searching and accessing materials, have a basic familiarity with the holdings of the institution, and otherwise be able to address questions students might have throughout their research process. The instructor can sometimes accomplish this by conducting their own research and guiding students from a place of experience, but they may also learn these local processes by working closely with an archivist before planning an assignment. As Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah Torres write in "AI: Archival Intelligence and User Expertise," "While researchers can potentially obtain subject knowledge and training in the interpretation of primary sources within the confines of their own disciplines or through special interest organizations, such as genealogical groups, the acquisition of archival intelligence [archival literacy] is something that should be embraced by archivists as a role unique to them in this educational puzzle."³⁶ In this case study, the instructor and the archivist developed the assignment and activities and planned the course logistics the semester before the course was taught.

Educators spend endless hours preparing and researching to build courses. It is probably a safe assumption that most instructors do not create assignments or grade said assignments without having some level of proficiency in the relevant topics. To create and grade an assignment without expertise in a field is a deeply flawed pedagogical approach; however, it is an approach that archivists sometimes see when instructors include archival components in their courses. Poorly framed assignments – or even assignments that worked well at other institutions but do not account for the research resources available to the current students lead to negative feelings in students that actually discourage their

³⁵ Chute, Swain, and Morris, "Connecting Students and Primary Sources," 155–56.

³⁶ Yakel and Torres, "AI: Archival Intelligence and User Expertise," 52.

future use of archives in their research. “If faculty do not attend to this reality—that one must know the context of the information need as well as understand how to use the archives and that their students may not be prepared in this way – they will plan difficult assignments or set up unfruitful visits to the archives.”³⁷ Anecdotally, we have encountered student researchers in the archives struggling to complete assignments written by instructors who have never visited their local archives or familiarized themselves with the resources available. Training the instructor has the potential to alleviate poorly designed assignments and activities, student and faculty frustration, and harmful outcomes, which include poor-quality grading and poorly completed assignments.

Instructors with limited archival research experience may also have limited awareness of archivists’ expertise not only in archival literacy – the logistics of searching finding aids or making research appointments – but also in primary source literacy. The basis for these faulty assumptions is multifaceted and is examined well in Matheny’s “Instruction Consultation for Archives Visits: Why No One Talks About It, and Why They Should.” In order to dispel the assumptions brought forth by potential instructional collaborators, we developed an instruction session planning guide³⁸ as part of the Archival and Primary Source Literacy Toolkit. When the archivist and instructor are both strongly encouraged to discuss learning outcomes and logistics, they both leave the planning conversation with a clear understanding of the plan for the course, minimizing the risk of miscommunication that Matheny discusses, which could potentially impair student learning outcomes. This planning process requires significant investment before the class commences. As demonstrated in the literature review, communication and collaboration between archivist and instructor is crucial. Even with the best intentions, misunderstandings and miscommunications can lead to confusion and frustration for all involved. “Instruction Session Planning Guide,”³⁹ a guide for both archivist and instructor, is designed to prepare both parties for the initial consultation. This document will also help instructors see, before the consultation, that the collaboration will take planning and time if the outcomes are to be successful. There are benefits to this approach: instructors

³⁷ Matheny, “Instruction Consultation for Archives Visits,” 493.

³⁸ Kristin Leaman and Adriana Harmeyer, “Instruction Session Planning Guide,” Purdue e-Pubs, 2023, <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/alt/5/>.

³⁹ Leaman and Harmeyer, “Instruction Session Planning Guide.”

who are uninterested in a deeper collaboration quickly learn that this may not be the partnership for them, and archivists learn quickly which instructors are interested and dedicated to this type of approach. We agree with the stance of Yvonne Nalani Meulemans and Allison Carr and encourage both instructors and archivists to decline potential instructional partnerships that are not founded on mutual respect for the time and expertise of both collaborators and for the best interests of the students.⁴⁰

2. The Course

At Purdue University, the English 108 Introductory Composition course meets writing and information literacy requirements for all students. In addition to writing skills, students are expected to develop research and information literacy skills across a variety of media and subject areas. There are roughly 50 sections of introductory composition offered and taught at Purdue University each fall and spring semester, with a cap of 20 students per section, and there are roughly 18 sections of introductory composition offered in the summer. Some sections are taught in person, while others are taught online (either synchronously or asynchronously). The model outlined in the Archival and Primary Source Literacy Toolkit was piloted in an in-person, introductory composition course in Fall 2022. We further developed the toolkit in the Fall 2023 iteration of this course. Each class had 20 students, and they met three times per week in 50-minute sessions.

At the beginning of the semester, students were provided with a course syllabus that prepared them for the classroom environment and expectations of the semester. The syllabus included a welcome statement created by the Purdue University LGBTQ Center to affirm students' perspectives in the classroom.⁴¹ An

⁴⁰ Yvonne Nalani Meulemans and Allison Carr, "Not at Your Service: Building Genuine Faculty-Library Partnerships," *Reference Services Review* 41, no. 1 (2013): 80–90, 81.

⁴¹ The welcome statement reads,

In this course, each voice in the classroom has something of value to contribute. Please take care to respect the different experiences, beliefs and values expressed by students and staff involved in this course. We support Purdue's commitment to diversity and welcome individuals of all ages, backgrounds, citizenships, disabilities, sexes, education levels, ethnicities, family statuses, genders, gender identities, geographical locations, languages, military experiences, political views, races, religions, sexual orientations, socioeconomic statuses and work experiences.

For more information, visit the Division of Diversity and Inclusion website.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Center, Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging, "Inclusive Welcome Statement for a Syllabus," Purdue University, accessed January 17, 2025, <https://www.purdue.edu/lgbtq/resources/faculty-staff/instructors/statement.php>.

additional statement developed by Kristin Leaman addressed the importance of information and archival literacy not only in the course but also in the broader research context of an R1 research university.⁴² Including these statements in the syllabus, rather than connecting them to a specific class session or module, helps students understand from the beginning of the semester that these literacies are important and will be addressed throughout the course.

The syllabus also included an outline of the course content structured around topical modules that led to a written assignment. The archival and primary source literacy module was scheduled for a three-week period in the middle of the 16-week semester. Each of the eight class sessions in the module focused on a different aspect of primary sources, archival literacy, or the assignment, allowing students ample time to learn these components, develop their topics, conduct their primary source research, and complete their assignments. This module was strategically placed *after* the first module of the course, when students received training in information literacy skills and critical thinking and writing. After the archival and primary source literacy module, students then began work on their final research papers. By the time students reached their research papers, many were well versed in information literacy, archival and primary source literacy, and critical thinking and writing. This also provided students the opportunity to utilize archival materials and their primary source research skills for their final research papers, which some did.

42 This additional statement reads as follows:

Purdue University is an R1 research institution, which means very high research activity takes place on campus. An important part of conducting academic research is understanding how to ethically and effectively search, access, and evaluate library and archival resources. Recognizing misinformation and disinformation, while determining what sources are credible is a critical skill in life and academia. The way in which library databases are created and maintained greatly impacts the terms you search and the results you receive. Subject headings and keywords are created by humans, which can be problematic when trying to locate research on a specific topic. Likewise, the collecting practices of archival repositories will impact the availability of materials on your topic. In this class, you will learn how to navigate and overcome these challenges throughout the semester. This will provide you an opportunity to strengthen your research skills and give you the tools to successfully conduct research throughout your academic career at Purdue University.

Kristin Leaman, "ENGL 108: First-Year Composition – Introductory Composition, Fall 2022," (unpublished course syllabus, Purdue University, 2022).

3. The Assignment

We created an archival literacy project assignment⁴³ for the three-week archival and primary source literacy module. The written assignment incorporates elements of both exploration and profile papers, in which students choose research topics to profile while also addressing questions about their research experiences. As in Roussain's approach, the focus of our class's final project assignment was on process rather than product.⁴⁴ The module emphasized archival literacy training to guide students in successfully locating, accessing, and exploring a topic of interest that was well represented in the archives in addition to providing them with the primary source literacy skills that would allow them to more fully and accurately assess the sources they identified. Topics were not pre-selected by the instructors; instead, students were encouraged to research topics that related to their own interests, which allowed them to explore resources that might be relevant to them in future research related to their majors or personal interests.

The archival literacy project assignment in the Archival and Primary Source Literacy Toolkit includes several components to guide students through the entire project. These include a description of the assignment, a list of possible research topics, and a list of questions to consider throughout the process. To aid the students in the writing process, the assignment also includes an outline of how the paper should be organized, a guide to citing archival sources, and a link to a checklist for citing archival sources, which is included in the toolkit.⁴⁵ Finally, the assignment includes a checklist for the final submission, a breakdown of the point distribution, and a grading rubric to ensure that students are aware of expectations throughout the assignment.

4. The Module

The module is designed with an active-learning, scaffolded approach to aid students' learning and to prepare them for successful completion of their assignments. Roussain states, "Scaffolding introduces a concept, then asks students to

43 Kristin Leaman and Adriana Harmeyer, "Archival Literacy Project," Purdue e-Pubs, 2023, <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/alt/1/>.

44 Roussain, "Pedagogue in the Archive," 97.

45 Kristin Leaman and Adriana Harmeyer, "Citing Archival Sources Checklist," Purdue e-Pubs, 2023, <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/alt/4/>.

perform a related task that lies just beyond their known ability. As a constructivist approach – where learners create their own knowledge by engaging with their environment – scaffolding purposefully creates a gap in understanding where engaged learning can occur.”⁴⁶ Employing an approach similar to Rousain’s, we would lecture on a concept and then support students as they put their learning to use in an active-learning environment. This meant we could include an important component of active learning in these sessions: encouraging students to share their discoveries “as they go.”

The first week of the module, led by the course instructor, introduced the assignment and the basics of archival research. This week laid the foundation for future archival visits by introducing principles of archival research via a brief lecture, exploration of the Purdue University Archives and Special Collections website and databases, and review of the researcher registration form, which included basic rules about the care and handling of materials. This week also allowed ample time for students to become familiar with the assignment and expected outcomes, learning more about the writing process in addition to the archival research aspect of the project. Finally, using a modified lesson plan originally developed by the archivist, the instructor introduced the topics of misinformation, disinformation, and archival silences in order to prepare students for the critical thinking and potential frustrations of primary source research.⁴⁷

During the second week of the module, students visited the archives and learned more about both the handling of physical materials and the navigation of digital resources. Day four of the module was our students’ first visit to the archives. This session, taught by the archivist, focused on hands-on experience with archival materials selected by the archivist to represent a variety of topics, formats, and time periods. Working in groups of three to four, students evaluated archival materials through three rounds of hands-on document analysis. Students were provided with a list of questions, adapted from a National Archives document-analysis worksheet, to guide their observations and group discussions.⁴⁸ These

⁴⁶ Roussain, “Pedagogue in the Archive,” 95.

⁴⁷ Adriana Harmeyer, “Archival Literacy and Misinformation Lesson Plan” (lesson plan for *English 108: Introductory Composition* library guide, Purdue University Libraries and School of Information Studies, 2023), https://guides.lib.purdue.edu/ld.php?content_id=72788278.

⁴⁸ US National Archives and Records Administration, “Document Analysis,” National Archives: Educator Resources, National Archives, accessed January 17, 2025, <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets>.

worksheets were not collected or graded but rather were meant to encourage students to think deeply about their analyses, steer their discussions, and serve as a resource for their individual primary source research later in the module.

For the fifth class session, students returned to their regular classroom but were taught by the archivist. Building upon the introduction to archival-database resources in week one, the archivist demonstrated more complex search techniques, discussed the information found in collection finding aids, and explained how students should search for and request materials for their projects. Because this session was held after the first archives visit, the archivist was able to search for records of materials the students had seen physically, encouraging discussion about expectations, the limitations of finding aids, and what might be missing from collection descriptions. After this session, each student selected and requested one box of materials to be used during their next visit to the archives. The archivist managed these requests and prepared materials for the sixth class session.

While the instructor and archivist provided this significant foundation in archival literacy and primary source analysis during the first half of the module, the remaining sessions of the archival literacy module were geared toward students' individual discoveries using archival collections. Session six saw the students return to the archives classroom, accessing for the first time the materials they had requested for their research. They were again able to compare the descriptions in archival finding aids to the physical materials. This session allowed them to work independently, but the archivist and instructor were both available to answer questions in the controlled classroom setting. After this visit, students were able to return to the archives reading room on their own the following week, navigating the full research experience outside the classroom for the first time. Of the 20 students, 15 chose to take advantage of an optional free research day built into the syllabus in order to spend more time with their chosen collections.

The final week of the archival literacy module saw students submit rough drafts of their projects and participate in a peer review process. This gave each student an opportunity to read and evaluate a classmate's approach to the assignment – especially important since they were all new to the primary source research process. The peer review was also another opportunity to develop students' written communication skills, an ongoing focus of the course. Students commented that they enjoyed learning more about archival materials and gained

more confidence in their own writing by participating in the peer review. Because clear direction and guidance on how to conduct a peer review and provide helpful and critical feedback is paramount, students had a worksheet as a guide; a peer review worksheet⁴⁹ is included in the toolkit. Finally, with feedback from the instructor and peer review, students submitted their final projects in week four. The instructor of record must grade the course work, so the archivist was not involved in this grading. This is why it is so critical for the instructor, who is far more equipped to evaluate student work, to be trained by the archivist both on archival and primary source literacy. Students also completed a written reflection on the assignment at the end of the module; a series of prompts for this activity, “Archival Literacy Project Reflection,”⁵⁰ is included in the toolkit.

Discussion

While student reflections provided some promising feedback, this was limited. With only 20 students in the course, the sample size was small. The data was also derived from student self-reports, and the nature of the reflection assessments meant students were not able to respond anonymously. We carefully reviewed students’ written reflections in order to understand their experiences with the archival literacy project assignment and the lesson plans during the three-week module.⁵¹ All 20 students responded that they had never worked with archival materials prior to this course and that they had found the peer review session, the archives orientation, and the in-class activities helpful in preparing them for the assignment. All 20 students also responded that this assignment should be a permanent assignment for introductory composition. One wrote, “I really enjoyed this assignment because I haven’t done anything like it before. I would recommend keeping this assignment so other students can experience the whole process too.”

⁴⁹ Kristin Leaman and Adriana Harmeyer, “Peer Review Worksheet,” Purdue e-Pubs, 2023, <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/alt/6/>.

⁵⁰ Kristin Leaman and Adriana Harmeyer, “Archival Literacy Project Reflection,” Purdue e-Pubs, 2023, <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/alt/3/>.

⁵¹ This study received an exemption from Purdue University’s institutional review board, IRB-2023-1784. All student quotations in this section are drawn from student responses to the questions in Leaman and Harmeyer, “Archival Literacy Project Reflection.”

Students also deemed the in-class visits to the archives and interactions with the archivist as beneficial, commenting that the “archives orientation and in-class activities definitely helped prepare me for this assignment” and “I enjoyed working with the archives and getting hands on; that was the best part.” The visit to the physical archives location also laid a foundation for future student research; as one student stated, “I am glad I had the opportunity to research the archives because prior to this assignment, I was unaware of the archives that Purdue University owns and how they are so critical in today’s world. It is very interesting, and I am excited to continue to look at archives!” This supports the findings shared by Daniels and Yakel, who note that, in addition to the planned educational outcomes, “simply learning that the archives existed and were available for their use was a revelation for many students.”⁵²

Student comments demonstrated the value of the assignment, lesson plans, and activities. Capturing the excitement of the students as they gained archival research experience and an understanding of the way archives are used, these reflections illuminate the relevance and importance of this teaching module. One student wrote, “Through working with archival materials, I learned everything has a story behind it. I learned to appreciate my history and learn from it.” While some students questioned the applicability of primary research to their chosen fields, there were no negative comments about the assignment or literacy training. We did observe that some students struggled at the beginning with inquiry-based learning when it came to archival literacy and primary sources. They had to learn a new way of approaching research, one that did not involve an assigned topic. As a result, students not only gained confidence when engaging with primary sources, they also learned that they were capable of tackling a new research method in alignment with the stated outcomes of Introductory Composition at Purdue (ICaP).⁵³ Of the 20 students in the class, 18 received As and one received a B on the archival literacy project; one did not complete the assignment, though they did complete the reflection. In “Learning in the Archives: A Report on Instructional Practices,” Krause emphasizes that many archivists lack formal

52 Morgan Daniels and Elizabeth Yakel, “Uncovering Impact: The Influence of Archives on Student Learning,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 39, no. 5 (2013): 414–22, 418.

53 Purdue University, “Outcomes for First Year Composition,” Department of English, accessed January 17, 2025, <https://cla.purdue.edu/academic/english/icap/outcomes-fyc.html>.

assessment of their instruction.⁵⁴ Krause's "It Makes History Alive for Them: The Role of Archivists and Special Collections Librarians in Instructing Undergraduates" further discusses assessment, stating that archivists rely on the faculty member's feedback to assess the success of the instruction session.⁵⁵ This raises some problematic questions: (1) If faculty are not trained in archival literacy or primary source literacy, how can they give an accurate assessment on the instruction session to the archivist? (2) How can faculty assess their own students when they do not have training in these kinds of literacy? (3) How can the archivist see the whole picture if they cannot read student reflections and assignments for themselves? Our toolkit addresses these issues directly with the assignment and reflection, both designed by the archivist and the instructor. The archivist also has access to the reflections and assignments, so they can see first-hand the impact of their instruction. Because the instructor has been trained in archival literacy and primary source literacy, they are better equipped to evaluate and grade their students' assignments utilizing the rubric created by both instructor and archivist. The reflections and assignments serve as useful assessments that provide valuable information to the archivist and the instructor to open further dialogue on how to enhance archival and primary source literacy instruction.

By the completion of the module, all students had experienced (and several had mastered) the five objectives from the Society of American Archivists and ACRL Rare Books and Manuscripts Section's *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy*: (1) "Conceptualize"; (2) "Find and Access"; (3) "Read, Understand, and Summarize"; (4) "Interpret, Analyze, and Evaluate"; and (5) "Use and Incorporate."⁵⁶ Students also experienced the six frames in the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*: (1) "Authority Is Constructed and Contextual"; (2) "Information Creation as Process"; (3) "Information Has Value"; (4) "Research as Inquiry"; (5) "Scholarship as Conversation"; and (6) "Searching as Strategic Exploration."⁵⁷ As Roussain recognizes, "An approach informed by

⁵⁴ Krause, "Learning in the Archives," 233, 248.

⁵⁵ Krause, "It Makes History Alive for Them," 407.

⁵⁶ SAA-ACRL/RBMS Joint Task Force, *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy* (n.p.: Society of American Archivists and Association of College and Research Libraries Rare Books and Manuscripts Section, 2018), <https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/GuidelinesForPrimarySourceLiteracy-June2018.pdf>.

⁵⁷ Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2016), <https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.

the ACRL frames and focused on engaging students in critical thinking offers an effective model for the archivist teaching primary sources and archival literacy.”⁵⁸ Our toolkit is grounded in both frameworks, with inquiry-based activities and an assignment that fosters critical thinking and exploration by supporting students through archival and primary source literacy. Repetition and practice are key to primary source and archival literacy, as Chase notes. Through multiple activities and the assignment, our students learned how to search, access, request, and evaluate primary source materials and communicate their observations with their peers. Furthermore, students learned how to read and critically analyze primary source materials while utilizing secondary sources to support the claims in their assignments. Because this was an introductory composition course, students also had to articulate and organize their thoughts through original writing for this assignment while correctly integrating and citing primary sources.

Conclusion

After reviewing our own experiences and student feedback, we modified our documentation before finalizing the toolkit. The assignment document, “Archival Literacy Project,” was expanded to include the questions for consideration up front, so that students could keep them in mind throughout the process. Student feedback and assignment grades confirmed our hypotheses about repetition and the importance of a full module on primary source and archival literacy. The introductory sessions, led by the instructor before the visit to the archives, laid a valuable foundation before students began researching on their own, thus confirming the importance of the introductory composition instructor’s own competencies in archival and primary source literacy. Students also gained consistent guidance from both the instructor and the archivist, reinforcing these skills in multiple settings.

Research days built into the course schedule allowed students room to research and ask questions as they developed new research skills. Even as they learned about their specific topics through the archival sources, they were still working throughout the module to internalize what they learned about primary sources,

⁵⁸ Roussain, “Pedagogue in the Archive,” 89.

care, and handling – even the location and physical spaces associated with archival research. When presented with the option of an archival research day, 15 of the 20 students chose to visit the archives and continue their research. In their reflections, students specifically noted that this was helpful as they continued to process what they had learned in addition to working on their assignments.

Though this module included one full week of training from an archivist, primary source research and archival literacy are skills that can take years to fully develop. We recommend that those planning similar modules should carefully consider what may be applicable to students or unique to their institutions when selecting which aspects of archival research to address. In the case of this course, the instructor and archivist did not discuss access restrictions in the initial lesson plan since restricted collections are relatively few. Minor complications arose when students requested restricted materials, which opened an important learning opportunity for those students navigating the request process but could have been minimized by briefly touching upon the access information notes available in the finding aid during the introduction to finding aids more broadly. This was added to the lesson plan for the Fall 2023 iteration and included in the final toolkit.

Scalability for archivists, instructors, and students is a focus of this toolkit. The framework provided in the toolkit can be modified and used by classes of any size, in any academic field, by any means of delivery. Though piloted in an introductory composition course, the toolkit may be applied to an archival and primary source literacy section in various disciplines with a focus on introductory research skills. While first developed for a synchronous, in-person course, the toolkit is flexible and can also be adapted to asynchronous, virtual courses. Digitized archival content remains a rich source for document analysis and primary source research and is especially useful when physical visits to archives are impractical due to schedule limitations, class sizes, or archivists' capacity. We developed a modified version of the assignment, "Archival Literacy Project E-Archives," adjusted for digital archives.⁵⁹ An instructor who is well trained in both archival and primary source literacy may implement the toolkit without the participation of an archivist by using digital archival content, but an initial archival consultation in developing the lesson plan is recommended.

⁵⁹ Kristin Leaman and Adriana Harmeyer, "Archival Literacy Project E-Archives," Purdue e-Pubs, 2023, <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/alt/2/>.

This toolkit also encourages sustainability of resources, including time and expertise. By investing time during the initial planning process, the instructor and archivist will have a strong framework, tailored to their specific situation and outcome, that can be continually reused with minimal adjustment from semester to semester. This streamlined planning process clearly defines roles in a partnership between the instructor and the archivist. It affirms the instructor's skills in archival and primary source literacy, which can be utilized not only in their pedagogy but also in their own research. A well-trained instructional collaborator can also advocate for archival and primary source literacy training in their home academic department, potentially leading to an even broader impact.

Our Archival and Primary Source Literacy Toolkit is open access and available online,⁶⁰ so archivists and instructors can use and adapt an existing curriculum rather than starting afresh with each new archival or primary source literacy class request. This toolkit removes some of the burden of initial course-collaboration planning by providing guiding questions, encouraging communication between instructor and archivist, suggesting what the instructor should be trained on, identifying sessions that should be taught by the instructor and/or by the archivist, and offering sample assignments and rubrics. Again, this toolkit encourages the instructor to be well versed in archival and primary source literacy and encourages the archivist to teach the instructor these types of literacy – skills that enable them to guide students through the module, appropriately assess their students' work, and provide meaningful feedback on assignments.

Through this case study, we have learned that students benefit from training in archival literacy and primary source literacy when it is provided by both their instructor and an archivist. Instructors are best able to teach their students when their pedagogy is rooted in an understanding of the content and associated learning outcomes. Through collaboration and mutual respect, instructors and archivists can build upon their unique expertise to guide students in introductory composition courses through their first archival research experiences. The Archival and Primary Source Literacy Toolkit and this article provide a structured method for implementing these types of literacy into existing courses and allow instructors and archivists to modify the provided documents to suit their own needs. Roussain's article "presents a call to action for archivists to self-identify as

60 Leaman and Harmeyer, "Archival and Primary Source Literacy Toolkit."

instructors,”⁶¹ and we hope our article serves as a helpful framework that enables both instructors and archivists alike to collaborate and co-teach archival literacy and primary source literacy to their students.

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61 Roussain, “Pedagogue in the Archive,” 70.

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